



Blinded By Our Prosperity

"You say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

Jesus Christ to the church at Laodicea,

REVELATION 3: 17

"When human beings refuse to use God's gift of money responsibly, they are handing over their power to Mammon, and he will take control. And when the powers take over, human beings get crushed."

N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus* (1994)

Any who have spent time in San Francisco may recognize at least some of these historical notables: Thomas Larkin, John Fremont, George Dewey, John Sloat, and Frederick Funston. Not only do major streets bear their names, but so also do the city's most prominent statues. They are honored among those who put San Francisco on the map. Collectively, they laid the foundation for what would become a major Pacific Rim center for multinational business elites.

These honored men, however, were not businessmen. They were officers of the United States military, mandated to fulfill America's "manifest destiny" across the continent and beyond. Larkin scoped out California. Sloat seized Yerba Buena from Mexico. Fremont established San Francisco as a base for Pacific naval operations. Dewey's flagship sailed from San Francisco to conquer the Spaniards in Manila Bay, and Funston squelched resistance to American occupation of the Philippines. Their efforts were foundational to the global superpower status we have today.

Thus, the monuments that adorn this city's promenades essentially celebrate our military greatness in service of economic opportunity, embodying the motto, "Gold in Peace, Iron in War." What the statues don't reveal, however, are the hundreds of thousands of Filipino and Native American fatalities, the flagrant mistreatment of Chinese and Japanese immigrants, and the socioeconomic oppression of mining, aqueduct, and railroad laborers required for this prodigious period of empire building. Such statuary is not unique. Bronze and marble veneration of war heroes and expansionist visionaries, while obscuring the costs, exists in every major city in America.

We who enjoy the highest material standard of living in the world have little interest in rehashing the dark subplots of our exceptional tale of progress and prosperity. We're even less inclined to examine the degree to which our nation continues to be driven by the most primal of human instincts: to pursue our wants, protect what we have, and use force if necessary. Defending our level of affluence at any cost is a message that echoes from the highest levels of government, as when our leaders assure us that "the American way of life is nonnegotiable."

Economic prosperity of one group at the expense of another has, of course, characterized the whole of humankind ever since the Fall. Having exchanged the worship of God for that of idols (Romans 1:23), the darkened mind finds ways to either justify or obscure greed and violence. Left to our own devices, we practice godless ethics among our human kin, trying, at best, to frame our actions as righteous. For example, we couch the whole of our economic arrangements (and the defense policies that undergird it) in idyllic notions of "freedom" and "democracy," despite the gross inequity, societal fragmentation, institutional cor-

ruption, and state-sanctioned violence that exist within it. Veiling such ugliness in lofty abstraction is the inevitable strategy of unconverted souls. But what does it say about the American church when we demonstrate unquestioning allegiance to a flawed and duplicitous system?

Christ's revelation to the church in Laodicea, a thriving commercial center, provides a gracious but sobering warning. Unambiguously, Jesus attributes their self-deceit and blindness to their intimate relationship with wealth. It's not that they did nothing valuable as a church, for he notes their works (Revelation 3:15). The problem is that their prosperity, made possible under imperial Rome, had lulled them into complacency. Seduced by the rewards of Mammon, the Laodicean church had become content with itself, casting God to the outside (v. 20), a perilous gesture that Jesus appears ready to reciprocate (v. 16). But with incredible mercy, Jesus offers a seat at his throne to the church—if only it will listen and repent (vv. 19–22).

As the church of the wealthiest nation in the world, our reluctance to identify with the Laodicean situation illustrates the deceptive power of Mammon. We're quick to argue the merits of neo-liberal economics, tax cuts, and privatization. But we're slow to hear the suggestion that we are deceived, blind to our sin, and in need of repentance. To do so requires that we start with Jesus' perspective, rather than our own.

Don't we all agree that Christians are to start with Jesus? So why don't we? ■

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